

Testimony Before the County Council (March 7, 2006): Regarding the Request for Special Appropriation to the MCPS' FY06 Capital Budget and Amendment to the FY05-10CIP

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I will keep my oral testimony brief, but hope you will read the more extensive written version, including the references, in its entirety.

SPOKEN TESTIMONY:

MCPS and the Board of Education have asked you for an additional \$3.3 million to facilitate construction of the Seven Locks Replacement on the Kendale Road site. We recognize that you are considering a number of factors related to this issue, but tonight we will focus on the special appropriation request.

The Civic Federation is here to urge you to JUST SAY NO.

We have all arrived at this point because of flawed process. The County Executive proposed using unneeded school properties to augment affordable housing. The Superintendent thought this was a good idea and the Board of Education agreed. Plans were changed. Numerous citizens objected and were heard, but not listened to. Heels were dug in, a bad idea took on a life of its own, numbers and facts were misused to support a flawed conclusion.

The Civic Federation remains convinced that Seven Locks ES should NOT be replaced by a mega-school on the Kendale Road site

So now you must make a number of tough decisions. Each is, arguably, not a simple one, but each IS a binary one. YES or NO? There are many appropriate ways in which to say YES to the needs of our public school system, but this supplementary appropriation is NOT one of them. We are here to urge you to JUST SAY NO to the request of MCPS and the Board of Education.

While this request is about funds for one school, this is in fact a County-wide issue. We are not just talking about what is best for one part of a school cluster, nor even just about one entire cluster. This is about process affecting the entire County and in this case the process has NOT worked. It did not work in Clarksburg and it has not worked at Seven Locks. There is a resonance between these issues that is perceived by many. And the recent IG report adds substantial weight to the argument that the MCPS Facilities Planning Process is in need of corrections. You must base your decisions on what is best for the entire County. Hence, you must JUST SAY NO to this request from

MCPS.

AFTER you make the proper decision and say NO to the request, there will of course be consequences.

Will this harm some of our kids? Maybe, in the short term, because construction of needed classroom space may be delayed. But, in the long term, don't we hurt our kids MORE by failing to make wise decisions, by misuse of public lands that are THEIR legacy, and by increased public debt (which they must pay)?

The Civic Federation believes there are better ways to use the requested funds and the available sites. Can this problem be resolved? Yes, and we are willing to help. We believe there are several possible solutions, including the one you are already considering.

But FIRST, you must make a decision about the requested special appropriation. And, on this "simple" question, we are here to urge you to JUST SAY NO. Do not waste our precious resources supporting a flawed decision that results from a flawed process.

EXTENDED (WRITTEN) TESTIMONY:

The Civic Federation has repeatedly indicated its reasons for objecting to the Kendale Road school project. Rather than repeat all those reasons, we have appended references to them at the end of this testimony. And have included other pertinent references. We hope that you will read, and consider, the remainder of the written version.

We all share the goal of providing the best possible public education to every child in Montgomery County, not simply because that is the right thing to do, but because it is vital to our democracy that all our citizens be well-educated and well-informed. We all recognize that the tasks given to the Board and MCPS are enormous. Our allocation of so many dollars to MCPS reflects our shared commitment to achieving those tasks.

The process of achieving those tasks is, of course, extremely complex and involves a seemingly infinite number of decisions. But no matter how complex the process and how numerous the decisions, it IS a series of decisions. And each such decision is essentially a binary choice. One may rephrase the wording, adjust the dollars, modify the timeline, and so on. But YOU must, in each and every case make a choice: Bigger or smaller, new gymnasium or not, this year or next, and so on. YES or NO?

We are here to urge you, at this particular decision point, to JUST SAY NO.

We are here because of a flawed process, whose numerous mis-steps have been repeatedly pointed out. One can argue the details, but the process is in essence one in which political decisions of considerable impact on the citizens of Montgomery County

were made without REALLY listening to the wise council of those citizens. The County Executive asked the Superintendent to give away unused school sites, so that affordable housing could be built. The Superintendent, and the Board Of Education decided to do so. And many of you agreed. Hearings were held and citizens were listened to, but not really. And a flawed idea begat a flawed project, because of a flawed process.

The Civic Federation does NOT object to building new schools or upgrading old ones. We STRONGLY support such Capital Improvements. What we object to is the arrogance of elected - or hired - officials who decide to undertake ill-conceived and expensive projects without adequately justifying them and/or without setting public policy so that the funds needed for such projects are raised from appropriate sources. And who insist on proceeding with such projects even when numerous citizens raise numerous valid questions and are denied adequate, credible, consistent answers or explanations. And when those officials further abuse the process by providing data that either change every few weeks or are provided with such reluctance that all but the most trusting begin to lose trust in the process.

While the request before you is about funds for one school, this is a County-wide issue, so we must not let the standard "divide-and-conquer" strategy prevail here. The interests of one group of students, or parents, or homeowners may - in any given instance - be in conflict with those of another group, but we must operate on the principle that decisions are made to serve the best interests of the entire community. If we follow a process designed to serve the broadest interests, we have the greatest likelihood of serving the interests of each group individually. This is about process and in this case (as in others) the process has NOT worked. It did not work in Clarksburg and it has not worked at Seven Locks. There is a resonance between these issues that is perceived by many. And the recent IG report substantially supports the argument that the MCPS Facilities Planning Process is in need of corrections.

Now you are faced with a tough decision. That is your responsibility. That is why you get "the big bucks". Is it simple? In one sense, of course not. In another sense, in the truly "big picture" sense, it really is just another binary decision. More money is requested. Yes or No?

We are here to urge you to JUST SAY NO.

We recognize that each such decision has consequences. Will this one hurt some of our kids? Maybe, in the short term, because construction of needed classroom space may be delayed. But, in the long term, don't we hurt our kids MORE by teaching them that the democratic process didn't work here? By mis-use of public lands that are THEIR legacy? And by leaving them with public debt (which THEY will have to pay) that has been increased - perhaps to an unnecessarily-large extent?

We believe there are better ways to use the requested funds and the available sites. Can this problem be resolved? Yes, and we are willing to help. We believe there are

many possible solutions to this mess. You are considering constructing an entirely new school on the Seven Locks site. And that might be the best solution. But there are other options. These might involve, for example, expeditious construction of a modest expansion of Seven Locks ES, followed by carefully planned construction of a modest school on the Kendale site. Or perhaps the Kendale site should be used for much-needed playing fields. And so on. No possibility should be rejected - even if it was previously rejected - because the decision process has - thusfar - been flawed. The details of any solution can only be achieved via a DIALOGUE that brings all stakeholders to the table and thrashes out the many possible solutions, rather than a HEARING at which each of us has 2 or 3 minutes to summarize our position on such a complex set of events and decisions. We need to dialogue with one another, not simply talk at one another. We view tonight as the beginning of that dialogue. It can be done expeditiously, so as to minimize delay in the much-needed expansion of school capacity in this cluster, but it must be done.

But FIRST, you must make a decision. And, on the "simple" question before you tonight, we are here to urge you to JUST SAY NO.

References:

1. The MCCF website (<http://www.montgomerycivic.org/index.asp>): See especially the Sentinel Articles of 11/18/04, 11/25/04, 3/24/05, 11/25/05 and 2/23/06.
2. The Save Seven Locks School website (<http://www.save7locksschool.org/>)
3. My testimonies before the BoE on its CIP (1/10/05) and, subsequently, on its Operating Budget (1/19/06) [Copies available upon request]
4. My written testimony on the MCPS CIP, sent to you on 2/8/06.
5. My Email to you on 1/16/06; copy available upon request
6. The OIG report on MCPS handling of the Seven Locks ES issue (<http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/oigtmpl.asp?url=/content/InspectorG/igproduct.asp>)
7. The MCPS response to #6 (<http://coldfusion.mcps.k12.md.us/press/index.cfm?page=showRelease&id=1846&startat=1&startYear=current&perpage=15&order=DESC&prevpage=browse>)